



The Children's LAW Center of Connecticut, Inc.  
30 Arbor Street, Suite 208  
Hartford, CT 06106

TESTIMONY OF JUSTINE RAKICH-KELLY  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE CHILDREN'S LAW CENTER, INC.  
February 16, 2022

Dear Co-Chairs Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and Ranking Members Senator Miner and Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for accepting this written testimony on behalf of the Children's Law Center, Inc. (CLC). My name is Justine Rakich-Kelly and I have been the Executive Director of CLC for over 21 years.

I am respectfully requesting an increase in the CLC line item to \$180,000. This line item is under the umbrella of the Judicial Branch. CLC has been the grateful recipient of funding from the State of Connecticut since 2007. Unfortunately, over the years, the funding has been mitigated and otherwise cut. In 2007, we received \$150,000 while providing legal representation for 351 children. In 2021, we received \$92,446 while providing legal representation for 750 children. This year alone, we have open cases involving 424 children ... and it's only February.

**In short, we are doing more with less and it is simply not sustainable.**

CLC is a non-profit organization and our mission has always been to help children whose families are restructuring have the best possible outcomes. The family court cases we are appointed to as guardian *ad litem* or Attorney for the Minor Child are not straight-forward cases where parents are moving successfully through the system. Our cases involve parents who are in high conflict and struggling with issues such as domestic violence, drug or alcohol addiction, parental incarceration, and a myriad of additional issues that carry with them a significant negative effect on the healthy development of children. **Our goal is to advocate for children's best interests and ensure that their needs are being met.** We talk with the parents, the children, guidance counselors, teachers, therapists, DCF, and other collateral sources to craft a recommendation for the court that recognizes and meets the individual needs of each child we represent.

**CLC is a resource to Family Courts, advancing complex cases that would otherwise devour court resources.**

CLC utilizes a dual-disciplinary model, allowing us to address not only the legal aspects of a case but also the emotional and mental health needs of the children and families involved. We have a licensed clinical social worker on staff who provides support for attorneys in the most complex cases in order to ensure that a viable, healthy parenting plan can be crafted, no matter how difficult the process. The outcome of this collaboration is not only "child centered", but also family-centered. This involves hours of out-of-court time on our part, working with parents to recognize the importance they both have to their children, assisting parents to have better communication, and connecting parents and children with community resources that will provide long term support once court is over. Most often our efforts result in parents resolving their court case by agreement. There is no vehicle for "billing" for our social worker's efforts, although her contribution is invaluable.

Until recently, CLC's legal representation of children was provided at no cost to parents because we accepted only those cases where one or both of the parents' incomes fell below 125% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. Recently, at the prompting of the Judicial Branch, we have begun taking cases on a sliding scale in order to allow those families that make too much for legal aid services but not enough to afford a private GAL or AMC access to justice.

The bottom line is this: We offer an invaluable service to Connecticut's Courts and Connecticut's children, but we cannot afford to continue at this level without increased funding. We respectfully ask you to increase our funding to \$180,000.

Thank you.